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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000389

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: AS ELECTIONS LOOM, AKP STILL WAY AHEAD

REF: A. ANKARA 377

1B. ANKARA 328

1C. ANKARA 323

1D. ANKARA 25

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Two weeks prior to March 29 local elections, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is maintaining a significant lead in the polls, despite a severely ailing economy. Most polling companies are predicting that AKP will win a minimum of 40 percent of the nationwide vote and will retain key mayorships such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Antalya, but will not be able to oust the Kurdish-nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP) in the Kurdish stronghold of Diyarbakir or the Republican People's Party (CHP) in its "secular castle" of Izmir. Our contacts ascribe AKP's dominance in the face of economic woes to AKP's far-superior campaign organization, the enduring appeal of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the opposition parties' lackluster attempts to exploit AKP's weakness on the economy and corruption. Although two weeks can be a long time in the unpredictable world of Turkish politics, the experienced and savvy Erdogan appears poised to lead AKP to a solid victory. END SUMMARY.

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AKP In Comfortable Lead  
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12. (C) MetroPoll President Ozer Sencar told us March 12 that AKP will win "well over 40 percent" of the vote in March 29 local elections and comfortably hold onto its key mayorships, such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Antalya. Metropoll's recent survey on the Istanbul race concluded that AKP incumbent Kadir Topbas will win 47 percent and CHP challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu 24 percent. Sencar said it is very unlikely AKP will be able to oust DTP in the Kurdish "fortress" of Diyarbakir, or CHP in its "secular castle" of Izmir. Other polling companies are predicting similar results. On March 13, A&G Research released a survey that found AKP's Ankara incumbent mayor Melih Gokcek will win 37 percent of the vote, CHP's Murat Karayalcin 31 percent, and MHP's Mansur Yavas 28. A&G found that DTP's incumbent Diyarbakir mayor Osman Baydemir will rout AKP's candidate, 71 percent to 26 percent. ANAR polling company's Ibrahim Uslu told us March 12 that he expects AKP to win between 42-45 percent of the nationwide vote, and retain almost all of its current mayorships; CHP would win 21 percent, and MHP 15 percent. Pollmark's Ertan

Aydin told us that AKP will win 45 percent nationwide, CHP 27, and MHP 15. Still, all of these contacts cautioned that two weeks is a long time in the unpredictable world of Turkish politics.

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AKP Blazes Campaign Trail  
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¶3. (SBU) Metropoll's Sencar told us that AKP has been ahead of its opponents at every step of the campaign -- it named candidates earlier, began campaigning sooner, executed more detailed and organized grass-roots outreach, and organized far more campaign rallies than its opponents. He noted that PM Erdogan kicked off AKP's first rally on February 8; Baykal and Bahceli began on March 1. Erdogan has since criss-crossed the country at a furious pace, attending 35 campaign rallies -- over twice as many as CHP's Baykal (11) and MHP's Bahceli (12). AKP contacts have told us that Erdogan plans to attend at least 70 rallies by the end of the campaign; CHP's Baykal reportedly plans to attend 35 and MHP's Bahceli 40 (to mark MHP's 40th anniversary). Both Baykal and Bahceli have said Erdogan is able to attend so many rallies only because he is using state funds and vehicles to facilitate travel. AKP contacts told us that security would be impossible without using state resources to transport Erdogan. They also pointed out that Erdogan's ambitious travel schedule is made possible not because of state vehicles but his "unmatched exuberance." One prime ministry protocol officer described Erdogan as a "workaholic" with "incredible endurance."

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¶4. (C) Throughout Turkey, AKP is executing superior on-the-ground outreach, and is much more effectively drawing upon its Ankara resources -- MPs and senior party leaders -- to support local campaigns. Embassy officers have glimpsed these superior organizational skills during pre-elections trips to bellwether cities of Izmir, Trabzon, Eskisehir, Kayseri, Konya, Yozgat, and Sivas, as well as to key cities in Istanbul and the Southeast. A March 9 trip to Haymana, one of a handful of Ankara sub-provinces where AKP does not have the mayorship, highlighted the difference. AKP's Haymana Chairman Oguz Yucel told us that AKP vice chairs and MPs had visited the sub-province at least once per week since mid-January, while not a single MHP MP or vice chair had yet visited to support the campaign of incumbent MHP Mayor Bunyamin Adaci (several unbiased contacts confirmed this fact). Yucel explained how he is leading AKP Haymana's Youth and Women's Auxiliary in carrying out an extensive door-to-door campaign; over one hundred volunteers had already canvassed thousands of households. Mayor Adaci could describe no such similar MHP outreach. Local shopowners told us that other parties' outreach paled in comparison to AKP's.

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The Unique Appeal of Erdogan  
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¶5. (C) Analistik Think Tank President Huseyin Kocabiyik told us that Erdogan's ability to resonate with the public, more than any other factor, is responsible for AKP's position high atop the polls. Kocabiyik said that Erdogan has a unique appeal for Turks because he is seen as "natural, down-to-earth, and affectionate," yet "proud and powerful." The "Davos incident" (ref A) had resonated particularly well with the Turkish public because it showcased Erdogan's "emotion and power, and his willingness to stand up to foreign powers." MetroPoll's Sencar told us that Erdogan's continuing confidence was translating into voter support. "The PM continues to connect with voters because he presents the image that he is ambitious, determined, powerful and hard-working," according to Sencar. Echoing a refrain we have heard repeatedly in recent days, both Sencar and Kocabiyik told us that the March 7 visit of Secretary Clinton

and upcoming visit of President Obama are reinforcing with the Turkish public Erdogan's image as a powerful and confident leader who is successfully elevating Turkey's stature on the world stage.

¶6. (C) On the economy, Kocabiyik said that Erdogan had convinced many voters that the crisis had come from abroad and AKP's earlier reforms had thus far softened the blow. He noted that the traditional family support structure in Turkey was helping to cushion the impact of the crisis. Kocabiyik told us that Erdogan has also been successful in distracting voters from the country's economic problems by orchestrating a campaign in which AKP focuses on delivery of services at the local level, and devotes attention to AKP achievements on national issues, such as the start of TRT-6, a Kurdish language television channel. Similarly, Kocabiyik said Erdogan uses his solid understanding of the "axis of tension" in Turkey to provoke and manipulate issues and individuals to his political advantage. He had used the Dogan media controversy (ref B), for example, to create sympathy from the majority of Turks who see Dogan Media as part of the traditional elite power structure.

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A Feeble Opposition  
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¶7. (C) The opposition's inability to exploit the key issues of the economy and corruption (refs C, D) has been just as important as Erdogan's popularity in maintaining AKP's strong lead in the polls, according to Sencar. He told us that the opposition has been feckless in exploiting the crisis, noting, "if Baykal had hit AKP hard on the economy and presented serious, specific proposals at every single campaign stop, AKP would never be polling at 40 percent at this stage in the economic crisis." Opposition parties had also not been able to make allegations of AKP corruption

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stick. He said that many voters overlook the fact that AKP is not a completely honest party, because they believe the party of Erdogan "can get business done." He also highlighted the emptiness of opposition campaign promises, noting that the parties, lacking a "shadow cabinet" have been unable to communicate to the public in concrete terms how they would run Turkey differently from AKP. Finally, Kocabiyik told us that the lack of any charismatic, forward-looking opposition leaders means that in this election, "there exists one actor, Erdogan, and one script."

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Jeffrey